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Column One: Playing Israel's good hand

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In these new and trying times, our leaders must shed their failed concepts of statecraft based on weakness and adopt new ones founded on strength.

On Wednesday night, Israelis received our first taste of the new Middle East with the missile strikes on Beersheba. Iran's Palestinian proxy, the local branch of the Muslim Brotherhood known as Hamas, carried out its latest war crime right after Iran's battleships entered Syria's Latakia port.

Their voyage through the Suez Canal to Syria was an unadulterated triumph for the mullahs.

For the first time since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Iran's warships sailed across the canal without even being inspected by the Egyptian, US or Israeli navies.

On the diplomatic front, the Iranian-dominated new Middle East has had a pronounced impact on the Western-backed Fatah-led Palestinian Authority's political posture towards the US.

The PA picked a fight with America just after the Obama administration forced Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak to surrender power.

Mubarak's departure was a strategic victory for the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and for its sister branch Hamas in Gaza.

As part of his efforts to neutralize the threat the Muslim Brotherhood posed to his regime, Mubarak sealed off Gaza's border with Egypt after Hamas seized power there in June 2007.

The Gaza-Sinai border was breached during last month's revolution. Since Mubarak's forced resignation, the military junta now leading Egypt has failed to reseal it.

The revolution in Egypt happened just after the PA was thrown into a state of disarray. Al-Jazeera's exposure of PA documents indicating the leadership's willingness to make minor compromises with Israel in the framework of a peace deal served to discredit Fatah leaders in the eyes of the Israel-hating Palestinian public.

In the wake of the Al-Jazeera revelations, senior PA leaders escalated their anti-Israel and anti-American pronouncements. The PA's chief negotiator Saeb Erekat was forced to resign.

The shift in the regional power balance following Mubarak's fall has caused Fatah leaders to view their ties to the US as a strategic liability.

If they wish to survive, they must cut a deal with Hamas. And to convince Hamas to cut a deal, they need to abandon the US.

And so they have. Fatah's first significant move to part company with Washington came with its relentless bid to force a vote on a resolution condemning Israeli construction in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria at the UN Security Council. In an attempt to avert a vote on the resolution that the US public expected him to veto, Obama spent 50 minutes on the phone with Mahmoud Abbas begging him to set the resolution aside. Obama promised to take unprecedented steps against Israel in return for Abbas's agreement to stand down. But Abbas rejected his appeal.

Not only did Abbas defy the wishes of the most pro-Palestinian president ever to occupy the White House, Abbas told the whole world about how he defied Obama.

Abbas's humiliation of Obama was only the first volley in the Fatah leader's campaign against the US. Abbas, Salam Fayyad and their PA ministers have sent paid demonstrators into the street to protest against America. They announced a boycott of American diplomats and journalists. They have called for a boycott of American products. They have scheduled a "Day of Rage" against America for Friday after mosque prayers.

While excoriating Obama and the US, the PA is actively wooing Hamas. On Wednesday, the PA accepted the legitimacy of Hamas control over Gaza. Three-and-a-half years after Hamas wrested control over Gaza from Fatah in a bloody coup, on Wednesday Fayyad said that the PA is willing to end its objection to Hamas control over the area if Hamas agrees to participate in the general elections Abbas has scheduled for September.

At the same time as he publicly beseeched Hamas to join forces with Fatah, Fayyad announced that the PA is willing to forgo US financial assistance if that assistance continues to come with political strings attached. The only real string attached to US aid is the stipulation that no US financial assistance can be used to finance Hamas.

THE PA'S announced willingness to end its receipt of US aid is by far its boldest move to date. With the Arab world going up in smoke, Fatah officials know they cannot expect to receive any significant funding from Arab states for the foreseeable future. That makes them entirely dependent on US and Europe.

And make no mistake, the PA budget is entirely a creation of foreign aid. The PA is the largest foreign aid recipient in the world. Last year, it received \$1.8 billion in foreign assistance.

US direct assistance accounted for \$550 million, or nearly a third of that amount. The US gave the PA another \$268m. in indirect assistance through UNRWA. UNRWA is the UN agency devoted exclusively to providing welfare benefits to the Palestinians while subordinating itself to the Palestinian political agenda.

Without US assistance, the PA would cease to be a political factor in the region. So by offering to forgo the aid, Fayyad, Abbas and their colleagues are essentially threatening to commit political suicide.

The Palestinians' declared readiness to forgo US aid is all the more remarkable when compared to Israel's refusal to countenance the thought of forgoing or even cutting back the assistance it receives from the US. Whereas the Palestinian economy will collapse without US assistance, were Israel to forgo the \$3b. in military assistance it receives every year from Washington, the move would have little impact on the economy.

Economic analyses of US military assistance have noted that several factors degrade the value of the aid. The US requires Israel to spend 75 percent of the assistance in the US. Israel's inability to open its purchases to competitive bidding in the world market has forced it to pay inflated prices for much of what it

buys.

So, too, by buying US weapons systems, Israel has harmed its own military industries, which are blocked from selling or developing systems for the IDF contractors.

Moreover, because the US has tied its aid to Egypt to its aid to Israel and justified its military aid to Jordan and Lebanon through its military assistance to Israel, by accepting the aid, Israel is enabling its neighbors to upgrade their military capabilities. Their upgraded military capabilities in turn force Israel to invest still more resources in its defense budget to maintain its qualitative edge against its US subsidized neighbors.

With all the hidden costs the military assistance entails, it is reasonable to discount the actual value of the aid by 50%. That is, the actual value of annual US military assistance is about \$1.5b.

The direct military cost of the Second Lebanon War is estimated at \$2.2b. The direct military cost of Operation Cast Lead is estimated at \$1.4b. The actual costs of both wars to the Israeli economy were several times higher.

Those who claim that Israel cannot manage without US military aid ignore the fact that neither of these wars had any discernible impact on the economy.

The political cost Israel has paid for US military assistance has been astronomical. As a recent study of US military assistance by the Jerusalem Institute for Market Studies demonstrated, the psychological impact of the US aid on Israeli and American leaders alike has had a disastrous impact on the relations between the two states and impaired their ability to understand the actual strategic rationale of their alliance. Israeli leaders have developed a subservient mentality towards the Americans and the Americans have forgotten that a strong Israel is the US's most valuable strategic asset in the region.

THE PALESTINIANS' expressed willingness to forgo their assistance from the US is no doubt a bluff. And Congress would do well to call their bluff and cancel US assistance to the PA.

Yet their behavior presents Israel with an important lesson about the fundamentals of diplomacy that appear lost on our leaders.

The Palestinians understand the rules of diplomacy far better than Israel does. Israel believes that diplomacy is about getting other governments to be nice to us. Palestinians understand that diplomacy is a nonviolent means of weakening your enemies and expanding your own power. They also understand that the starting point for any effective diplomatic strategy is a reality-based assessment of other government's interests.

As the revolutions throughout the region show, in the real world, the Arabs do not care about the Palestinians. Europeans and leftist Americans care about the Palestinians. European leaders need to support the Palestinians for domestic political reasons. US leaders support the Palestinians to maintain good relations with Europe and with the American Left.

Recognizing this, the likes of Abbas and Fayyad understand that no matter what they say or do, the West will probably not abandon them. Europeans need them to continue carrying out their political war against Israel because that is what their constituents demand. US leaders will continue to support them because they follow Europe's lead.

On the other hand, given their newfound power, PA leaders have to bend over backwards to appease Hamas and Iran if they wish to survive.

Since they rightly assess that the West needs them more than they need the West, not only are the Palestinians unwilling to pay any price for maintaining Western support for them.

They are willing to initiate ugly confrontations with the US and humiliate Obama in order to win the approval of Hamas and Iran.

Facing this reality, Israel's best bet is to initiate a few confrontations of its own to demonstrate its strategic importance to the US and Europe.

With the conflagrations raging in the Arab world essentially making its argument that a strong Israel is imperative for the West, Israel should be going on the offensive against the Palestinians and the international Left that supports them.

But instead of pointing out the truth, Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu and his colleagues maintain their posture as supplicants to Washington, making concession after concession in exchange for further abuse in the hopes of avoiding a confrontation.

For instance, Netanyahu has defied his own party and broken his word to the public by maintaining an undeclared freeze on Jewish building in Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria. Since January 2010, Netanyahu has systematically denied Jews building permits in the area in the hopes of appeasing Obama.

And how has Obama repaid Israel for our government's willingness to deny Jews their civil rights? The Obama administration has branded all Jewish communities in post-1967 Jerusalem, Judea and Samaria as "illegitimate," and blamed Israel for the absence of peace in the region.

As our region is consumed by the flames of rebellion and revolution, the challenges and threats Israel faces multiply by the day. In these new and trying times, our leaders must shed their failed concepts of statecraft based on weakness and adopt new ones founded on strength. The PA is playing a bad hand wisely.

We are playing a good hand foolishly.

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